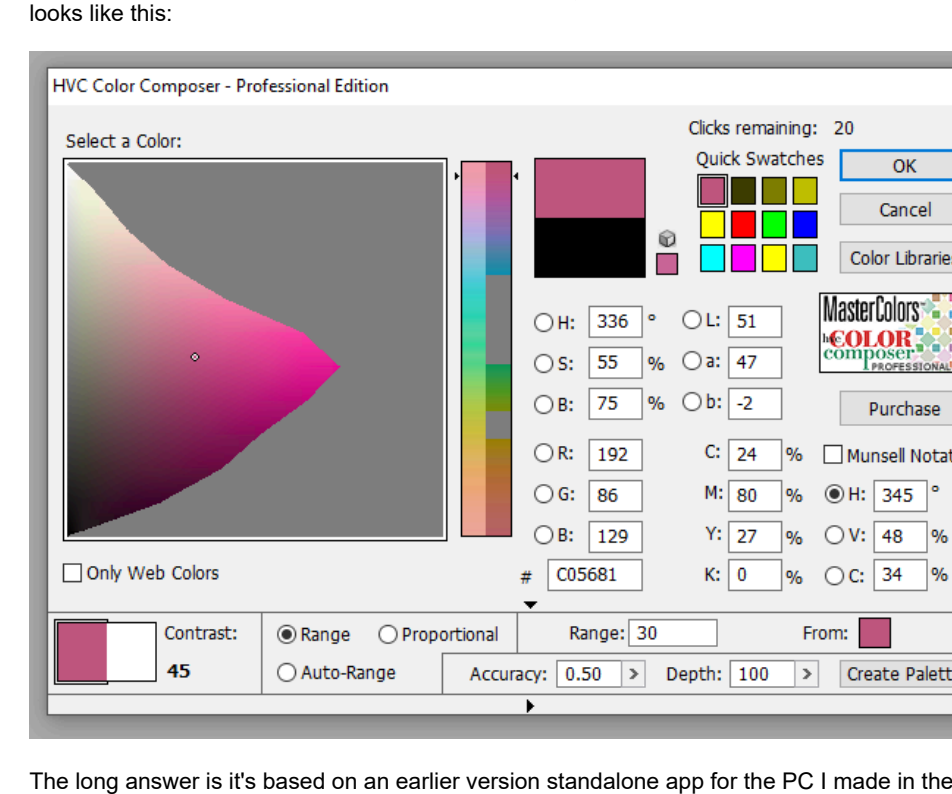
What The Fuck Is The HVC Color Composer?

The short answer is it's an alternative color picker plug-in I wrote for Photoshop back in 2004. It looks like this:

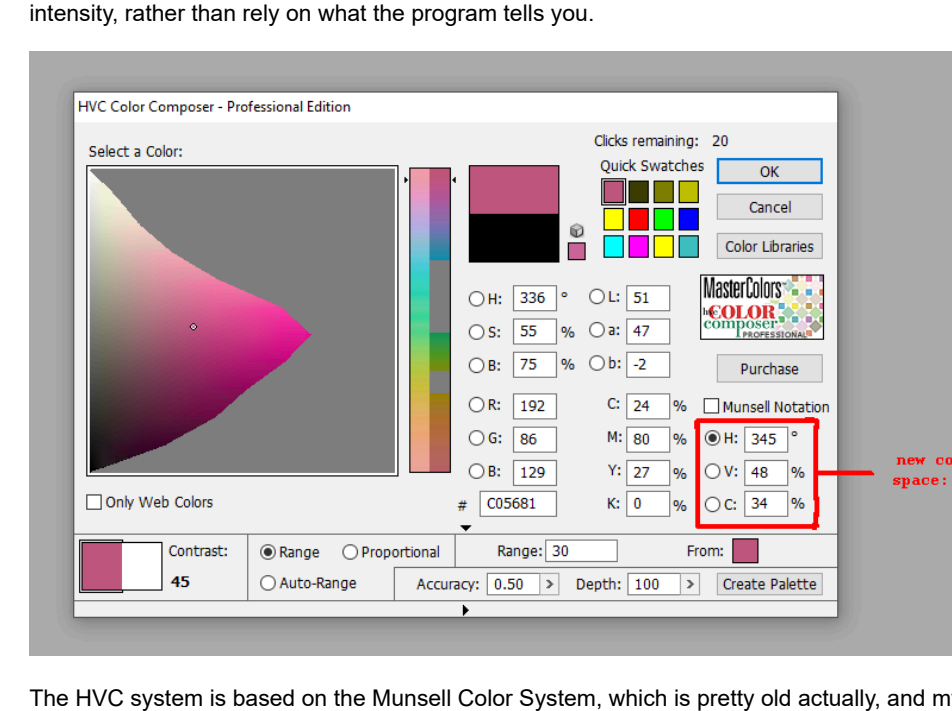

HVC Color Composer - Professional Edition
Select a Color:
Clicks remaining: 20
H: 336° S: 55% B: 75%
L: 51 a: 47 b: -2
R: 192 G: 86 B: 129
C: 24% M: 80% Y: 27% K: 0%
☐ Munsell Notation
● H: 345° ○ V: 48% ○ C: 34%
☐ Only Web Colors
# C05681
Contrast: 45
● Range ○ Proportional ○ Auto-Range
Range: 30
Accuracy: 0.50
Depth: 100

The long answer is it's based on an earlier version standalone app for the PC I made in the 1990s when I was 17 or so, with a long and crazy story behind it having to do with my dad's vision as an artist, his weird color theories that made no sense, and his ill-advised decision to turn the software I created for fun to make sense of his theories into a ridiculous business that made no money whatsoever and which ultimately, arguably, killed him along with his shady business partner.

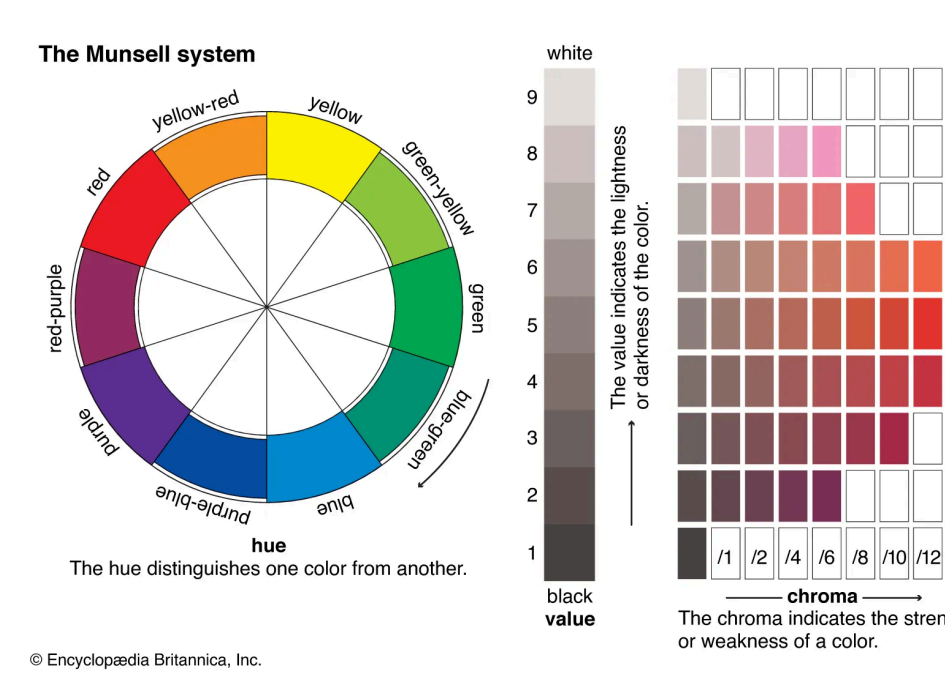
The reason that I suspect some people know about this is because there are two patents to my name, also related to this story, filed in 2004 and 2005. My dad, who had the same name as me, wanted these filed under my name in association with the business he started. I had no particular interest in either filing or holding these patents, but I did anyway to humor him, which is a pretty good way of describing my entire involvement with this business. The first patent covers the tech used in the above plug-in. The second patent covers a somewhat related method that would improve detection capabilities in medical imaging software, focused on cancer detection in particular, which seemed like cutting edge stuff at the time, but I'm sure is archaic by modern imaging standards. I wouldn't know, because I fell off with this field of research a long time ago.

Before I cover that history, I'll just explain how the color picker works.

If you are familiar with Photoshop, you probably recognize the basics of the color picker. I just expanded it to add a few features, the main one being the HVC color space, which is a perceptual color space. This means every Hue page has a different shape, so the most saturated peak of that Hue maps accurately to where its Value (lightness) and Chroma (intensity) should really be. Contrast this with the standard HSB space (which is just a simple transform of RGB) which always puts the most saturated color in the upper corner, no matter what its other qualities. So the most intense yellow, which is very light, falls on the same position as the most intense blue, which is much darker. This isn't a very helpful way to organize color, and forces the artist to make a lot of their own judgments about a color's actual lightness and intensity, rather than rely on what the program tells you.


HVC Color Composer - Professional Edition
Clicks remaining: 20
H: 336° S: 55% B: 75%
L: 51 a: 47 b: -2
R: 192 G: 86 B: 129
C: 24% M: 80% Y: 27% K: 0%
● H: 345° ○ V: 48% ○ C: 34%
# C05681
Contrast: 45
Range: 30
Accuracy: 0.50
Depth: 100

The HVC system is based on the Munsell Color System, which is pretty old actually, and my dad was obsessed with it as an artist (he was a painter, and was primarily fixated on how to use color well). Normally, it's very swatch-based, like this. In the old days you bought books full of sheets that looked like this.


The Munsell system
yellow-red
yellow
green-yellow
green
blue-green
blue
purple-blue
purple
red-purple
red
hue
The hue distinguishes one color from another.
white
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
black
value
The value indicates the lightness or darkness of the color.
/1
/2
/4
/6
/8
/10
/12
/14
chroma
The chroma indicates the strength or weakness of a color.

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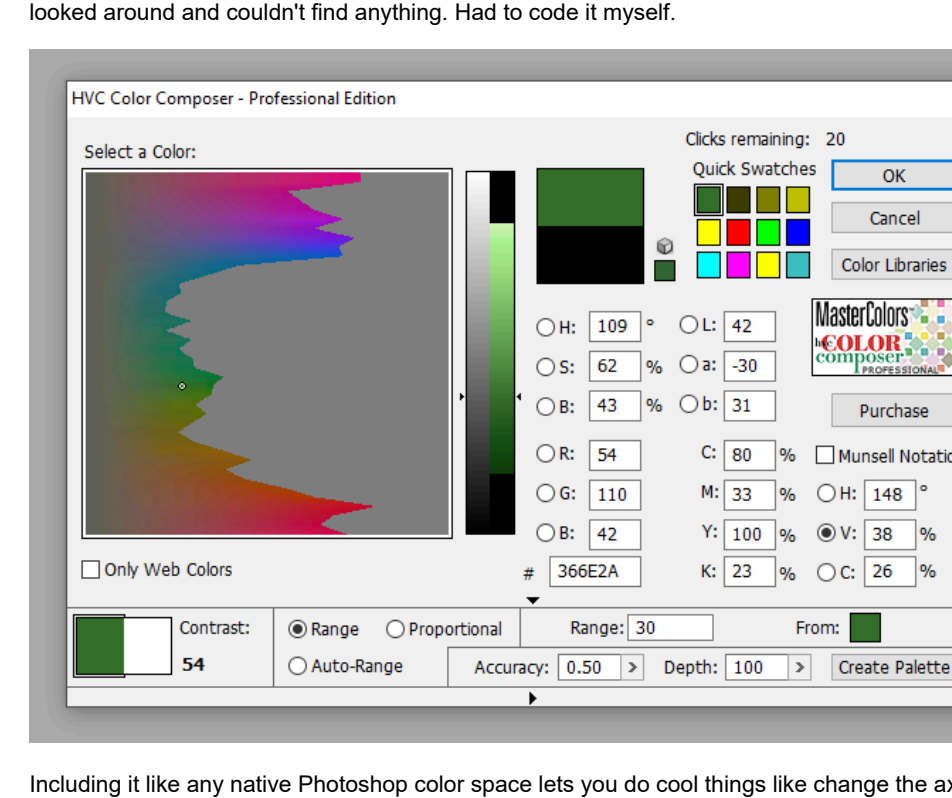
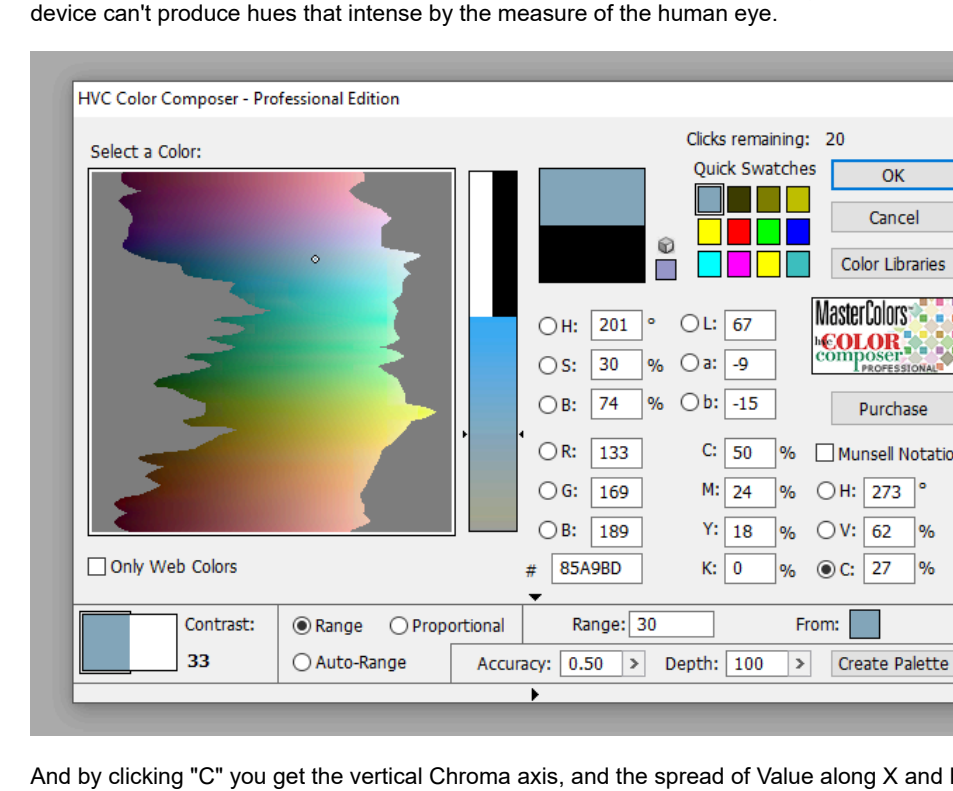
But since I was creating software, I needed to convert this into a fully continuous color space that accounted for every color a device could produce. So I wrote the code to create that space out of Munsell data. That was in the 90s, which I don't think had really been done yet, because I looked around and couldn't find anything. Had to code it myself.

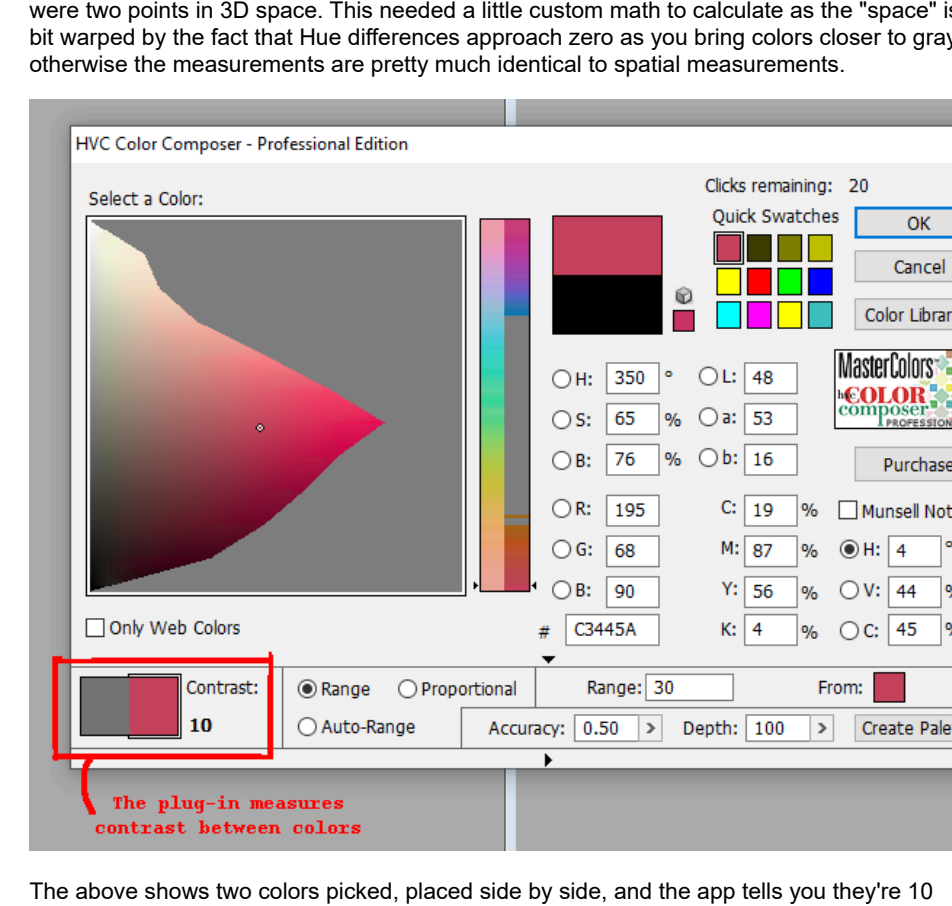

HVC Color Composer - Professional Edition
Clicks remaining: 20
H: 109° S: 62% B: 43%
L: 42 a: -30 b: 31
R: 54 G: 110 B: 42
C: 80% M: 33% Y: 100% K: 23%
○ H: 148° ● V: 38% ○ C: 26%
# 366E2A
Contrast: 54
Range: 30
Accuracy: 0.50
Depth: 100

Including it like any native Photoshop color space lets you do cool things like change the axis, like switching to "V" above, letting Value be the vertical axis, and Hue/Chroma in the square. So you get to see where all the peaks for each Hue at that Value are, which lets you know relative intensities of those Hues, and the empty space is where the device is out of gamut - that is, the device can't produce hues that intense by the measure of the human eye.

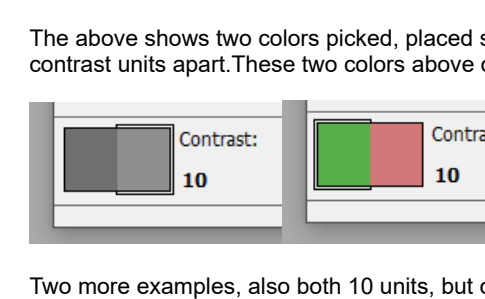

HVC Color Composer - Professional Edition
Clicks remaining: 20
H: 201° S: 30% B: 74%
L: 67 a: -9 b: -15
R: 133 G: 169 B: 189
C: 50% M: 24% Y: 18% K: 0%
○ H: 273° ○ V: 62% ● C: 27%
# 85A9BD
Contrast: 33
Range: 30
Accuracy: 0.50
Depth: 100

And by clicking "C" you get the vertical Chroma axis, and the spread of Value along X and Hue along Y, again showing the missing places where no colors exist for Hues that light or dark.

The addition of HVC to the picker is a nice feature by itself, but that wasn't actually the point. The point of using HVC at all was what it allowed you to do with it, using other features of the app. Because it was such a visually accurate, evenly-distributed perceptual color space, it let you measure the contrast between colors by resolving the "distance" between colors as if they were two points in 3D space. This needed a little custom math to calculate as the "space" is a bit warped by the fact that Hue differences approach zero as you bring colors closer to gray, but otherwise the measurements are pretty much identical to spatial measurements.


HVC Color Composer - Professional Edition
Clicks remaining: 20
H: 350° S: 65% B: 76%
L: 48 a: 53 b: 16
R: 195 G: 68 B: 90
C: 19% M: 87% Y: 56% K: 4%
● H: 4° ○ V: 44% ○ C: 45%
# C3445A
Contrast: 10
Range: 30
Accuracy: 0.50
Depth: 100

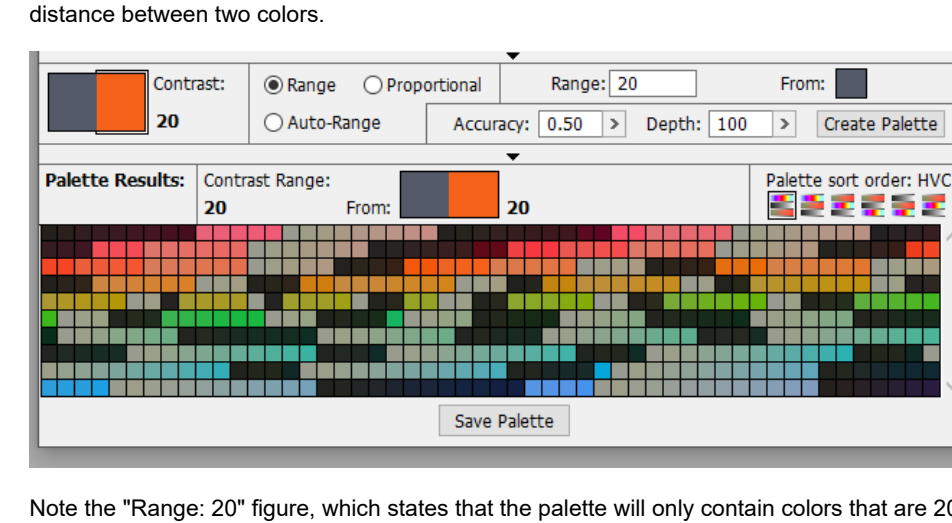
The above shows two colors picked, placed side by side, and the app tells you they're 10 contrast units apart.These two colors above only differ in Chroma.


Contrast: 10
Contrast: 10

Two more examples, also both 10 units, but one differs only in Value, the other differs only in Hue. Note that despite the different axes contributing to the difference, the contrast between all of them looks about the same. (This is approximate of course, as your device might cause the colors to vary.)

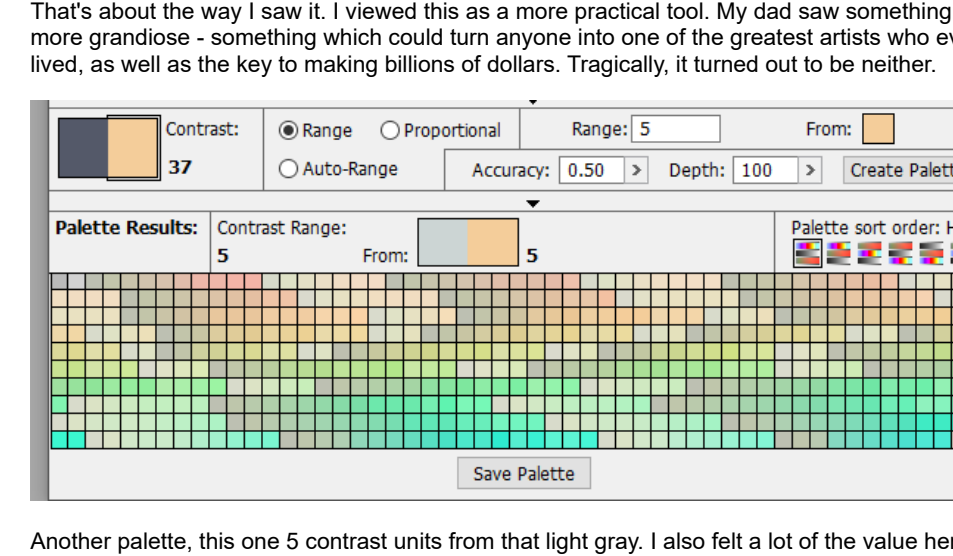
So the ability to measure contrast accurately in this manner was the basis for the color theory this app captured, and was also the crux of those two patents. Everything about the theory revolved around this capability which HVC provided.

Which brings us to the actual color theory itself, which is driven by the creation of palettes full of colors which are either all at a fixed contrast value from a single color, or all at a proportional distance between two colors.


Contrast: 20
● Range ○ Proportional ○ Auto-Range
Range: 20
Accuracy: 0.50
Depth: 100
Palette Results: Contrast Range: 20 From: 20
Palette sort order: HVC

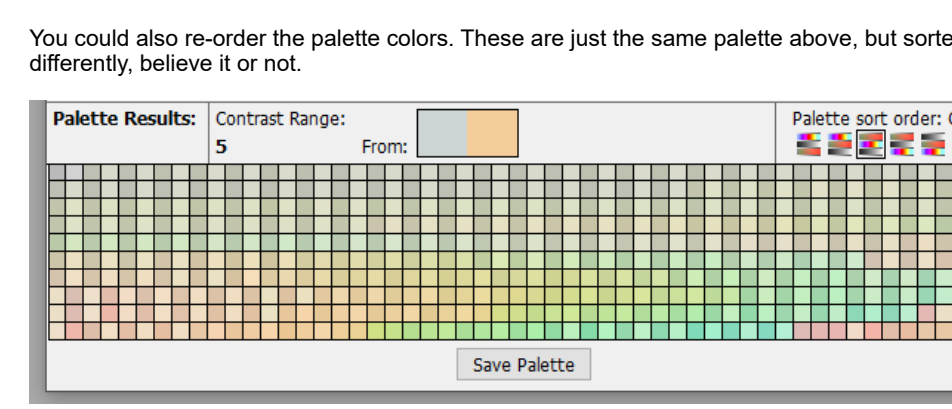
Note the "Range: 20" figure, which states that the palette will only contain colors that are 20 units of contrast away from that selected dark gray color. The idea behind this theory is, you could then freely pick any number of colors from this palette, drop them on the dark gray, and they would all have an equal contrast with the gray, generating a supposedly "harmonic" feel, if you wanted to believe the hype my dad and I were espousing in the early 2000's. But there are more reasons than that to want a palette like this. If you are an artist who works with color a lot, then you understand why contrast between them is important, and having such precise control over that feature through palette generation could be very useful.

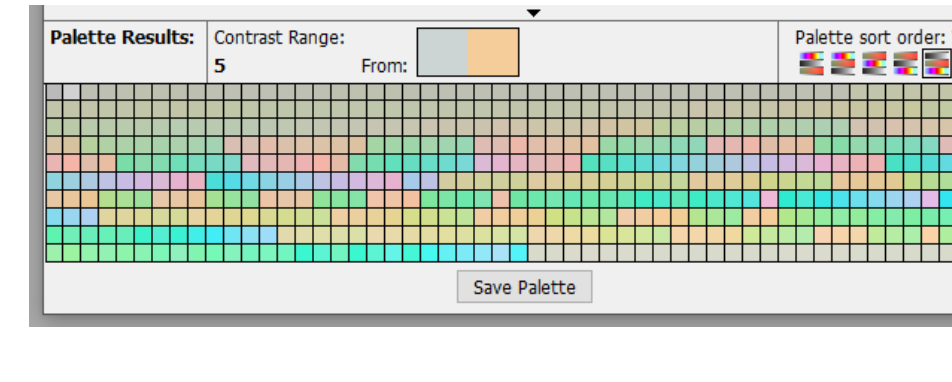
That's about the way I saw it. I viewed this as a more practical tool. My dad saw something more grandiose - something which could turn anyone into one of the greatest artists who ever lived, as well as the key to making billions of dollars. Tragically, it turned out to be neither.


Contrast: 37
● Range ○ Proportional ○ Auto-Range
Range: 5
Accuracy: 0.50
Depth: 100
Palette Results: Contrast Range: 5 From: 5
Palette sort order: HVC

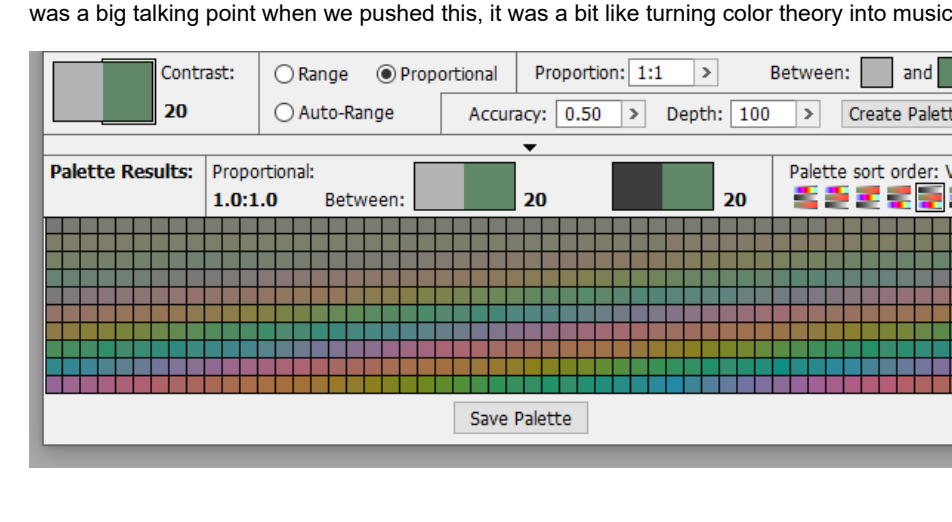
Another palette, this one 5 contrast units from that light gray. I also felt a lot of the value here was, this thing just made nice palettes that were cool to use, even if you had no idea what the fuck was going on (this described most people who tried this product).

You could also re-order the palette colors. These are just the same palette above, but sorted differently, believe it or not.

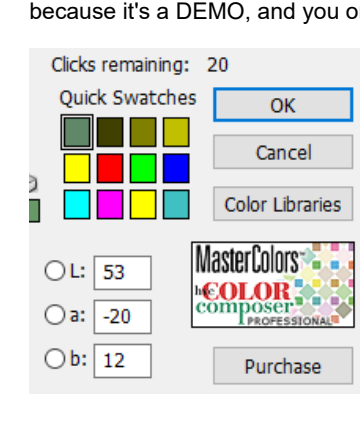

Palette Results: Contrast Range: 5 From:
Palette sort order: CHV


Palette Results: Contrast Range: 5 From:
Palette sort order: VCH

Then another palette-generating mode is if you switch it from "Range" to "Proportional". Then you start by picking two colors instead of one. If "Proportion" is set to 1:1, then it will find all the colors which are equidistant to your two starting colors. If you set it to 2:1, then the palette would be twice as close to one color as the other, and so on. This was a way to achieve these "harmonic" relationships between colors, by arranging them in these mathematically proportionate contrast-distances in relation to each other, similar to the way music works. That was a big talking point when we pushed this, it was a bit like turning color theory into music.


Contrast: 20
○ Range ● Proportional ○ Auto-Range
Proportion: 1:1
Between: and
Accuracy: 0.50
Depth: 100
Palette Results: Proportional: 1.0:1.0 Between: 20 20
Palette sort order: VCH

One thing that jumps out at me now, using this years later, is this thing is basically unusable, because it's a DEMO, and you only get 20 clicks of the "OK" button before you have to buy it.


Clicks remaining: 20
L: 53
a: -20
b: 12

I don't even have local copies of this thing, I lost track of them long ago. I got the download from a Wayback link someone dug up. So there's no way to purchase it, I have no idea how to generate keys or how the underlying architecture works to unlock it. So someone would need to crack it. Or you can just take screenshots as I've done here, and eyedrop the colors in the screenshots. This actually isn't even a bad method.

But the more this project got startup-fucked by my dad and his scammy business buddy, the more it just seemed like a waste of time to me. I would go around to things like trade shows and conventions demoing this app, and I found we practically had to beg people just to take a look, let alone understand what this even was, but my dad and his friend were clinging to this business model of getting people hooked on a demo, and purchasing when they ran out of clicks. I would be surprised if it ever touched 500 sales lifetime. I always tended to think it would be better if we just gave it away for free and tried to get a lot of people into it, then maybe Adobe would license it or something.

But my role in the company wasn't really about them listening to my ideas, in reality I was sort of a prop. Marketed a bit like a young Zuckerberg to companies and investors. This company started when I was 20, around 2000, which was the dawn of the original tech bubble. So it was a real gold rush moment in tech, people were trying to cash in, and they had me running around like I was the genius kid who was going to reinvent color shit forever. In a way, maybe I sorta did? The problem was, the business made no sense, and it was a borderline grift the entire time because the business guy kept raising investment funds to subsidize his own salary, while my dad and I barely made anything.

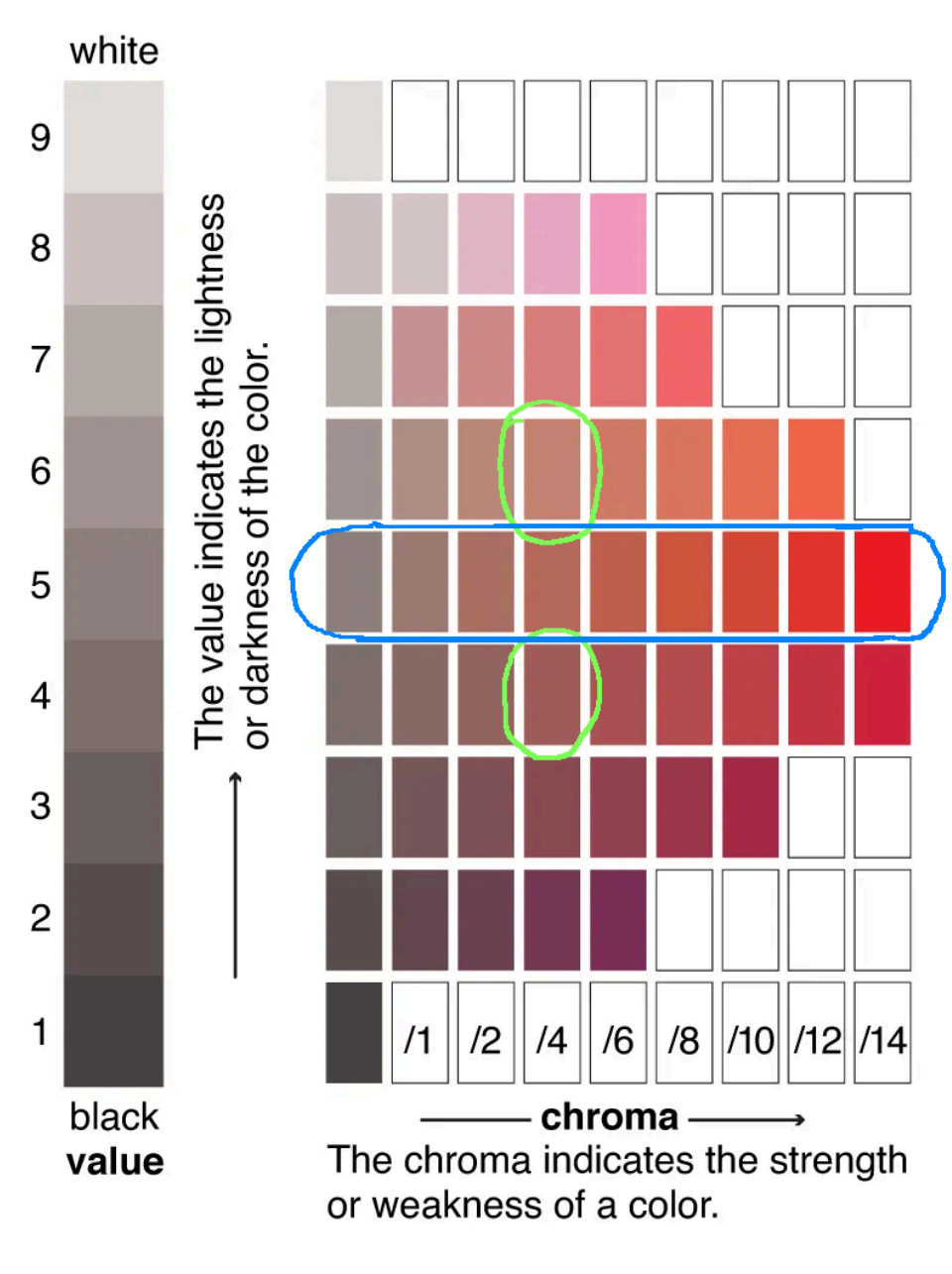
I was pretty much done with this racket by the mid-2000s, and transitioned to something I liked better, which was making comics. Actually I was already making comics before this was over, the HVC Color Composer was released in 2004, which was also the year I posted my first webcomic. I think by that year the whole operation just seemed too tacky for me, and it was easy to make the leap to do something I actually enjoyed, even though there was no theoretical promise of "riches". I preferred to stay broke and just start making weird shit than continue chasing my dad's absurd dreams of color fame and fortune.

The Story Of Master Colors

I always thought the name of this company sucked. It's a name my dad picked. I didn't really get it. I remember the process of him and his buddy brainstorming, it sounded like people coming up with a band name and landing on the worst idea they had as a compromise. If you can't tell yet… I just didn't like this company.

But before it was a company, it was just an insane theory which he didn't even know how to talk about coherently, and it drove his whole family crazy for years. He had a huge catholic family, nine total siblings, and a lot of them were also artists. He would talk about this theory and nobody knew what he was trying to say. I heard this stuff most of my life as a kid, until I achieved some sort of sentience as a teen and finally sat him down and asked him to walk me through it so I could properly systematize it for him. I was learning to program at the time and thought I could make an app to demonstrate the theory in action, assuming it actually made sense.

I listened to him ramble in his studio, would watch him mix paint and show me certain demonstrations. Most of what he said didn't make sense, but there was one demonstration that seemed to hint at what he meant. He had his Munsell book around, because he was obsessed with that color system, then pointed to two swatches, the ones below circled in green.


white
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
black
value
The value indicates the lightness or darkness of the color.
/1
/2
/4
/6
/8
/10
/12
/14
chroma
The chroma indicates the strength or weakness of a color.

Then he pointed at the whole row circled in blue, and said, SEE?? And I said no, what are you talking about. He says that the two colors above and below have an equal relationship to the ENTIRE row in the middle, which means you can pick any of those colors in the row to coexist with the two you picked, to achieve a sense of balance, like a little color theory hack. So I said OH!!! I see, you're hinting at performing a sort of spatial operation on this color chart, like plotting a slice between two points, and declaring that slice to be of a certain harmonious relationship with the original colors, and these are the basic rules we can build on.

But I didn't say that, because he didn't know anything about programming, and the type of "vision" he had was way too murky to even really think in terms of coherent system design, which I knew. So I just ran with the whole theory myself and built it into something usable, along with the first prototype of the HVC Color Composer, which was a cruder looking standalone Windows exe file, which still did just about everything the plug-in above did. So it wasn't just a programming challenge as a new programmer, it was also trying to build a new color theory almost from whole cloth out of this idea he showed me by picking two swatches and drawing a line. I came up with this complete set of principles that placed a premium on "harmonic relationships" between colors as defined by their mathematically interrelated contrast values, and started applying the principles of music to bring some order to those color relationships. Then I built the software around the idea that these principles should be served by palette-generating tools, which included building an HVC space out of a limited Munsell swatch set, and sorting out some new spatial math to render distances in that model.

Then I showed it to him.

There have been times when I've debated with myself over whether this was literally the worst thing I've ever done in my life. Because the moment he saw it, it sort of radicalized him. He became a zealot for his own color theory, which actually was now pretty much my theory, because it included a lot more of my original thinking and development than he ever put into it, and he recognized that. So his zealotry became twofold - it was a sort of religiously fanatical obsession with this brand new "color lore" which he literally spoke of in spiritual terms, evangelizing about it as a preacher would, and it was also a fanatical elevation of me, in a way that now nearly strikes me as parasocial, to a virtually infallible "young savant" status that, as flattering as you might think that would be, actually started to wear thin pretty fast. This is also why he insisted on filing those patents. It wasn't just about equity for the company, or protecting the tech from competitors - it was something he wanted me to have, because he believed I did something truly noteworthy, and wanted me to have something in my name of value that could live on beyond the fate of the company, no matter what happened with it.

But the revelations my software gave him changed him forever. He was now on what he viewed as a holy mission to spread this knowledge to the "suffering artists" of the world (he was sure all artists were poor and suffering, struggling to sell their paintings, because that's the life he knew), and he viewed this divine color knowledge as the antidote to their suffering because it would instantly make everyone an amazing artist through quality of color choice alone. And this holy color crusade might have been fine, if a little eccentric, if not for the fact that it instantly started mingling with a bizarre financial ambition disproportionate to what the tech actually did, which was largely fueled by his con artist buddy who was looking for a new racket after flaming out as a shady commodities broker. He heard my dad preaching about this hot new color shit, and got ideas, started whispering in his ear about money… it was actually funny, because they were both indoctrinating each other, and I was just there. I always saw him as a bit like a cult leader, who only had two members in his cult - his son and his shitty business partner. He had a lot of charisma, and flexed it on everyone, but especially his two acolytes. There were suffering artists to save, after all.

When I say he spoke of our color mission in religious terms, I'm really not exaggerating. His background explained this. He grew up catholic and was thusly indoctrinated in youth, but rebelled from that life as he found the tradition oppressive and lacking in answers of substance, so like many from that generation (youths of the 60's and 70's) he got pulled into eastern movements, many of which were pretty cultlike, and settled for the long run into the Transcendental Meditation movement. Which as far as cults go, was pretty tame, but still culty enough to influence his demeanor, so I grew up hearing a ton of this jargonized new age babble, which was galvanized through his charismatic personality such that he sounded very much like a spiritual demagogue in his own right. This side of his personality came out in full force when I accidentally radicalized him with his own revamped color lore.

For the first couple years of this shtick, I probably did drink the kool-aid on his evangelizing (of… my own ideas back to me?? It was strangely circular.) It's hard not to be swayed by a guy who everyone thought was the funniest guy they ever met, you're his son, you're 20, you just spun up a brand new avante garde color theory and program just to make him happy and put his tortured artist's mind at ease, then he spends every waking minute telling you what a genius you are, how revolutionary this is for the world, and how much money it's going to make. I probably wouldn't be the only kid to start following marching orders under such circumstances.

So I did. I went to the trade shows, I did the Webex demos with investors, talked all the genius talk I was supposed to, started building plug-ins for Photoshop, took the bus alone to Adobe HQ and gave a presentation to some engineers who never returned our calls. I made sample graphics, websites, free brochures for cons, wrote all the color propaganda, hung around on the endless conference calls with dad and his business guy listening to them bullshit about the latest psychic reading. His buddy literally would consult psychics constantly for business advice and tell us all about it. He rotated through a lot of psychics, but finally settled on his favorite one, who was a pet psychic, but did human stuff too I guess.

But as much as I was in the thrall of my color preacher father's sermons designed specifically to blow smoke up my ass, eventually this did actually start to seem kind of boring, given that it wasn't actually functioning as a real business in any meaningful way, and also given that it became increasingly clear the business guy was full of shit and was likely a literal con man. So I started drifting to other areas where I thought the tech could be applicable, and started working on the medical imaging stuff with a very elderly color scientist guy who was impressed with my tech, we collabed for a while on something we thought was promising for cancer detection (my dad was sure to get that patented too), and that imaging tech was supposed to work its way into some medical devices he was involved with, but then that project sorta went nowhere because I stopped hearing from the guy, couldn't get in touch with him, so I assumed he probably died because he was about 90.

It's worth noting for later purposes that neither of these patents ever made a dime, or were ever licensed or exploited in any way, except through my one Photoshop plug-in which didn't sell for shit. There's a rumor that because these patents exist, it must point to some great legacy fortune I came from, through the work of my father. If you've heard these rumors, perhaps now you can see how laughable this idea is.

My dad was broke his whole life, and died broke, but for the final two or three years of his life which intersected with the period where Homestuck finally started making some actual money, I supported him for a while, paying his rent and pretty much everything else. Then he died.

He always dreamed of being a fine artist, making a lot of paintings, putting them in galleries and selling them for great sums, but that never came together for him. He actually didn't even paint much. He talked a lot more about painting than actually painting, and the moment I brought his color vision to life, he dropped any pretense of being a painter and became a professional evangelist for our new color religion. The only times he ever made any money was when he practiced his actual profession, which was journalism.

He worked for newspapers off and on. Mostly off. He spent most of my childhood not having jobs, forcing my mom to work shitty jobs, waitressing or office work, while he hung around the house trying to paint, sometimes succeeding, but never selling. The times he worked for papers, the pay was shit. But I also think he had his best moments at some of those local papers, because I think he was a little too dense not to understand that you weren't supposed to do "real journalism" at some of these papers. Like digging into local corruption and such. He busted some people, even won some awards I think, but made some people mad, and that arc didn't last too long. After that, he did a little time at a tabloid where journalistic standards are much lower (or instead you could say, shitty journalism is rewarded), then finally declared his retirement via Master Colors whether the ship came in or not.

But for a hot minute there, he was probably doing something right. Something thankless, that doesn't pay much, and points you to the exit quickly, but nevertheless requires real effort and determination. Asking questions, telling the truth, don't just make shit up, don't cram half-baked fact patterns into prefabricated narratives to fit ideas for a story you already have, don't write things about people you think you already know, don't make crazy leaps in logic whenever facts are missing to sell the narrative you're looking for. Don't put out slop you know will get eyes on your words at the expense of the truth. That's what the tabloids are for, the gutter for the burnouts who once aimed higher, or for those who never had the integrity to bother with standards in the first place.

If you aren't picking up the subtext here, I grew up dirt poor. We were moving constantly, getting utilities turned off, cars repossessed, in and out of my grandmother's home which is where my dad crashed permanently after he and my mom divorced when I was 10 or so. The guy holding the purse strings for Master Colors barely spotted me a penny while he was living grotesquely off investment capital he was raising off my tech, so after college I stitched together a miniscule living with art commissions and stuff like that until I limped along to my webcomics era, at which point the limping continued, because I barely made anything with webcomics either. But I did know HOW to make webcomics, and increasingly, I gained an intuition for what was likely to become popular, which is how the site MS Paint Adventures began. The critical feature of this site being extreme speed, enabling me to update constantly, and keep an audience heavily engaged, which was simply not possible with "better art". I continued this model for years thereafter, and this was also the key to Homestuck's success.

The story that really kicked off this creative model was Problem Sleuth, and despite the fact that this did turn out to be quite popular for its time, I was still totally fucking broke during its entire run. It was a little better than years before, because I started selling some decent merch through my friends at a store called Topatoco. Then, I began Homestuck, which also started out by being fairly popular, because it inherited the previous story's audience. And I was still broke. I was getting by, but just barely. This pattern lasted about a year and a half into Homestuck, until the summer of 2010 when the trolls got introduced, and crazy shit started happening. Suddenly I realized I couldn't even keep those shirts in the stores. They had to constantly be restocked. So that's when it all picked up. The intense merch demands were satisfied a bit by getting my formerly very humble garage-merch company What Pumpkin, which had only sold a handful of shirts previously, to carry a lot of that load and start shipping a big range of stuff out of a warehouse in Florida.

So by 2011, this was finally all doing pretty damn well, and my dad, who probably never had more than 1000 dollars in his bank account at any one time in his life, was seeing this. He also was in the midst of an epic crashout from his post-Master Colors life, and was now about as close to being homeless as possible without literally living outside. He also, unbeknownst to me, only had three more years left to live. This is when I started giving him money.

But to cover the post-color crashout, we need to rewind to 2008, when I was in a creative frenzy over the story Problem Sleuth. At this point, it was clear to both my dad and his grifter buddy that I had moved on from the company for good, and I didn't want to hear another fucking word about their depressing scam. I was in the middle of doing something I sincerely enjoyed, people liked it, it was making a LITTLE money, enough to pay rent, and that was good enough for me. I was never doing any of this for money. Actually my comic work ironically was always a spiritually therapeutic undertaking because it represented a RETREAT from a former life defined by a soulless hustle designed to make money at the expense of a once compelling vision. So I was ghosting their calls and I didn't want to hear their shit anymore, about which investor was still good for what these days. They were both bummed out, and I could tell they knew the racket was about to implode.

The con man buddy took it especially hard, because he too treated this scam like a retirement plan, and it was about to go bust. His health was falling apart. Actually, his pet psychic called this. Of his many fraudulent psychics, ironically the pet psychic was the only one I was impressed with, because she kept NAILING IT, and had the guts to call negative shots too. Around then, she was telling him he needed to go see a doctor immediately, because she saw a little dragon coiled up in his intestines which was doing him no favors. Of course this sounds like new age claptrap, so even he totally ignored her, except soon after that, he died of a raptured intestine because he was so depressed he was literally eating himself to death.

So that guy died in the summer of 2008, half way through finishing Problem Sleuth, which if you weren't there for that, was a year-long, every day gauntlet of content production and rapid release. This was relevant for me because this triggered a certain chain of events. When the grifter died, this was obviously the final nail in the coffin for this shitty company, and my dad could see the writing on the wall. That dream was finally over. So was any hope of the big score his buddy promised, not even to speak of the poor suffering artists. This was so stressful he collapsed from an ulcer and needed care at home for a while. He lived with his recently deceased buddy in Colorado, so he was now alone. I lived in Massachusetts, so I promptly flew out and lived with him for the rest of the year to take care of him. I also finished Problem Sleuth during this time. This health crisis forcing me to go take care of him during my insane self-imposed work schedule was a bit like foreshadowing. This happened again in a more extreme way five years later, during Homestuck's "gigapause".

He got better, I left Colorado, went back to Mass, started Homestuck, and doubled down on the creative grind to an unprecedented degree. Homestuck was MUCH harder than Problem Sleuth, for reasons I'm sure I've explained elsewhere. My dad eventually followed me to Mass and sort of orbited me for a few years, not having a job, generally declining in lifestyle and health, and being vaguely concerning, until finally I started making enough money to make sure he didn't end up on the streets. Then in the summer of 2013, he got sick again, but this time it was cancer. He was doing badly right away, didn't have anyone, and needed some assistance getting through it.

It also happened that at this time I was now five years deep into an oppressive, grueling creative marathon on MS Paint Adventures where I had either posted every single day, often multiple times a day including weekends and holidays for those five years, or I wasn't posting on certain days because I was working even harder than usual on an animation which would be posted several days later. This was completely exhausting, now I was hearing my dad had cancer and needed a lot of treatment, my life wasn't that great in a number of other ways, and on top of all that, my fandom was way too big and intense, and I was pretty much cooked at this point. So that's when I announced what I called the "gigapause" which turned out to be a year-long hiatus from making Homestuck, much to the frustration and in many cases anger of a lot of people. What I didn't mention back then was the primary reason for this was my crazy father who spent the last 15 years crashing and burning because of some silly software I wrote now had cancer, and needed my help getting to and from hospitals and recovering from various surgeries that never went well.

So that wasn't exactly a fun time, but it started mixing with the ever-creeping toxicity of a fandom I started feeling like I was losing the handle on, partly due to the necessary neglect stemming from the gigapause, and the most pronounced way this took effect was through a huge spike in my stalker problems.

I had a lot of stalkers around this time. They started snowballing a few years before with increased visibility, and maybe something about the way I was presenting myself - a mysterious cryptid guy who liked to mess with fans, but who also seemed to have a lot of answers. Many people who got obsessed with me treated me that way, as the guy with answers, and who needed to be shaken down for more. It reminded me of the way my dad saw me. When I fixed his color lore for him, he started viewing me as someone who basically knew everything, and turned me into a reverential figure. This also started happening with fans, but sometimes it got really dark.

One of the more striking examples was a girl who sent me tens of thousands of emails, many violent. I just created a filter to sort those emails away so I didn't see them, and they eventually stockpiled to such a high number, which would have been easy enough to ignore, but she kept escalating. She followed me around to conventions, which made her hard to spot, because she wore cosplay to disguise herself. Then she would get to the front of the signing line, start acting weird, and I'd have to run away. She's the reason why I stopped going to conventions forever back in 2013. But her most daring moment was when she tracked down my home town, figured out my dad was sick, and went to the hospital to harass him on his death bed for about an hour, looking for dirt on me, until the staff realized something was off and called the cops.

He told me he just spent the hour trying to convince her to go home. I guess he didn't seem to mind, but also by that point, he wasn't really himself anymore. He was starting to lose his mind and was hallucinating a lot. So I guess this encounter was just two crazy people wasting each other's time. Still, I tend to think this wasn't the best use of one of his few remaining hours. These were strange times, and in truth, they continue to be strange, because the stalking problem never quite stopped. I still have a lot of stalkers, and sometimes they shapeshift to avoid detection, and use clever tactics to launder their destructive stalker intentions through behavior which doesn't outwardly scan as stalking to everyone. Tactics like spreading lies, invading my creative work, intentionally inciting widespread hatred, or desperately clinging to control of hostile server communities for apparently no other reason than to continue wielding a lever of harassment against me and my friends.

So he died in 2014, which also coincided with the early difficulties of trying to produce Hiveswap. I was doing a ton of work on Hiveswap planning throughout the gigapause during the final months of his life, where his personality was now essentially unrecognizable. The dev at the time was not keeping pace with anything I was doing, and the only evidence I got they were working on it at all was one prototype of the engine (this is now public material out there somewhere) that looked so insanely bad, I knew I couldn't show it to the rowdy, increasingly impatient Homestuck fandom, because I thought it would incite a mutiny against the dev. So I waited and waited for more progress from them, my dad died, I was finally free from tending to him, I quickly moved out to California to be near the dev to help them get the project moving, waited and waited some more, asked if I could come to the office, they said it was under construction so don't come… I waited some more… the fandom kept breathing down my neck for progress…

So I realized this partnership wasn't going to work, because I felt like the fandom was about to explode from the lack of demonstrable progress. So I dropped the dev, and the severance of that deal was actually amicable at the time (9 months later during arbitration to settle return of funds to us was a different story, because they spent most of those funds on other stuff, leaving almost no budget left to make the game), and I quickly got to work establishing a new studio basically overnight to reassure the fans the project wasn't dead, and we were still on it despite a setback from a dev who turned out to be too busy for the job, although I did not say anything like this at the time so as to stay professional and considerate to those at the old studio who were not at fault for whatever was going on there. I didn't want to turn this fandom on those people. However, in 2021, an especially pernicious lie was spread that I was actually the one who exploited this dev, and I was the one who was unable to keep up with the schedule. This was wrong of course, I and a co-writer were producing a ton of material, staying heavily engaged with the project, I tried MOVING out there to get the dev team fired up for the project, they shut me out of the office, were slow to answer emails… they were a disaster in 2014, and they knew it. Even so, things actually ended amicably with that dev. They helped animate Act 7 - they started it, my team finished it after we parted ways. Everything was fine. Then their lawyer got involved, forced arbitration, and created a half-million dollar shortfall in the NYC studio budget, closing that studio a few months later.

Maybe it's time to pause here, because a story about my dad's shitty color business ruining his life, running him into the ground, and effectively killing him through the neglect of his health which that multi-year crashout caused, is now dovetailing into a story about my struggles with trying to keep a massive, relatively new webcomic enterprise propped up under the crushing weight of a huge, ornery fandom, while business complexity and gamedev dysfunction swirled around me, I was being severely stalked, and I was on the verge of losing my mind from dealing with my dying color preacher father for a year, who spiraled into an often vindictive sort of delirium as he wasted away. That's the point I guess, many of these hardships all mix together in my mind and now seem inseparable. But there are two distinct stories here, with a bit of timeline overlap, and a lot of thematic overlap: a story of a shitty color business of my father's making which wasn't successful at all, and a chaotic webcomic business of my own making, which was arguably too successful, and was straining under the weight of fandom demand and public scrutiny while I was in no real personal position to be putting out these fires.

So, back to the color shit first, to finish that story off.

The handful of people who are aware of the HVC Color Composer have wondered if this is a tool I used to assist with my color choices as an artist. I also sometimes hear that my use of color in Homestuck is one of the more impressive things people take away from it, so they also wonder if there's a correlation between this program and the observable effects on my work. The answer is, yes there's some correlation, but no, I stopped using the HVC Color Composer the day I stopped giving demos to people to try selling it. In fact, I never used it as an art tool at all. What really happened is, I worked so much on this thing for a few years, my brain essentially BECAME the HVC Color Composer, and now I just operate intuitively with color as if I were using the tool. It's not that hard really, I just have a feel for where HSB color values line up with where they would appear in the HVC space, I have a good sense for measuring contrast by eye no matter which axes are contributing to that difference, and I also have a sense for when proportional color compositions will have some sort of aesthetic utility in an illustration, which is just a matter of intuition. There are no hard rules to this, it's all by feel, and the point is to make stuff that looks good however you can get there, not follow some rote methodology to arrive at prescribed "color harmony" which is more the view my dad took with it. In the final years of his life he actually did use this program a lot to assist with a bit of last minute painting, maybe sensing the end was near, and probably wanting to recapture the spirit of what this program was supposed to serve in the first place: making art.

I'm sure these final moments where he was actually using it to make art probably reminded him of how greatly the vision went astray over the past 15 years. The derailment in vision happened not only because he completely lost his shit with ideas about "artist salvation" and "billions of dollars" which turned him into an extremely esoteric sort of zealot, but more notably, because he locked arms with an idiot grifter who immediately seized control of business operations to squeeze it for every dubiously-gotten investment dollar he could get his hands on, mostly to pay himself. By the time I was done with this company, it was hard to describe how disgusted I was with this con artist. It was obvious what he was by the time it was over, even to my dad. After his grifter buddy died, my dad and I spent most of our time clowning on him whenever we got together. He was a very stupid and corrupt guy, shady, underhanded, superstitious, frequently relegating company fortune to psychic consultation and made sure to wait until Mercury wasn't in retrograde to make certain moves. It was an insult to everything this was supposed to be about having him involved.

This is where the story intersects with the history of Homestuck, because there are a couple of guys I could name who were very similar to this color grifter, whose shoddy work and shady intentions really altered the course of Homestuck's arc as a business for the worse. All of that is probably too much to get into now, and in any case, Homestuck history is a very complex topic, tends to be politically loaded as one of the fixations of the fandom's fever swamp, and has been badly misrepresented and misused by certain obsessed individuals, a group which includes many stalkers. So covering topics like that may be best saved for another time.

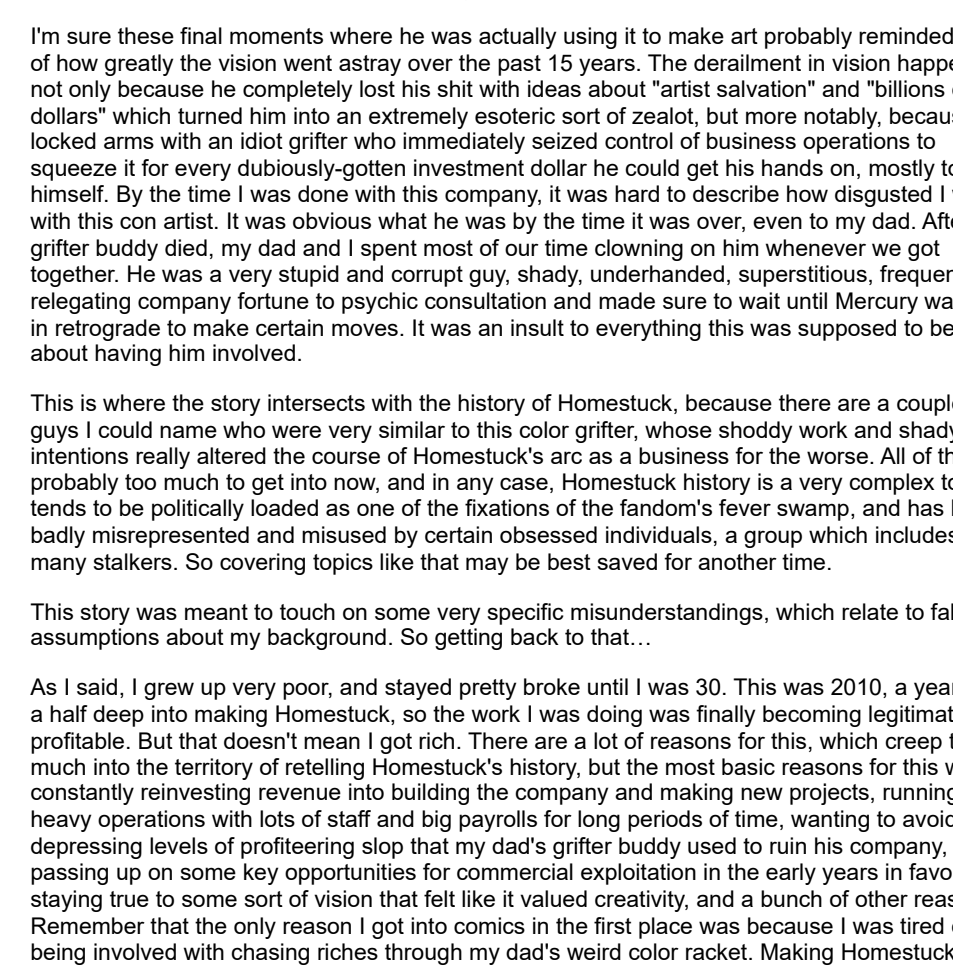
This story was meant to touch on some very specific misunderstandings, which relate to false assumptions about my background. So getting back to that…

As I said, I grew up very poor, and stayed pretty broke until I was 30. This was 2010, a year and a half deep into making Homestuck, so the work I was doing was finally becoming legitimately profitable. But that doesn't mean I got rich. There are a lot of reasons for this, which creep too much into the territory of retelling Homestuck's history, but the most basic reasons for this were: constantly reinvesting revenue into building the company and making new projects, running heavy operations with lots of staff and big payrolls for long periods of time, wanting to avoid the depressing levels of profiteering slop that my dad's grifter buddy used to ruin his company, passing up on some key opportunities for commercial exploitation in the early years in favor of staying true to some sort of vision that felt like it valued creativity, and a bunch of other reasons. Remember that the only reason I got into comics in the first place was because I was tired of being involved with chasing riches through my dad's weird color racket. Making Homestuck was always supposed to be about a genuine expression of creativity, and making something that actually mattered to people.

So the bottom line there is, I never got rich off Homestuck at all, and I definitely wasn't rich before I started it.

It's a common and convenient misconception among certain people that I either got rich off all this, or started out rich beforehand, and is an idea which has been fueled almost entirely by someone who's spent about six years working tirelessly to push misinformation about me into fandom spaces.

Having stated what my actual financial background is, and the history of my work on the color patents associated with my dad's unorthodox and highly unprofitable color theories, let's take a look at one of the many false statements made about me, presented with absolute certainty and no sourcing whatsoever.


Bonus Features 2b

One of the reasons I decided to look through Psycholonials in the first place is… well, that the author is wealthy.
Even before Homestuck, Andrew came from a rich family with serious monetizable patents. Like, he has *capital* capital.
That's one of the things that's always made his whole juggaloo thing a little odd. Like, that's a community that's deeply rooted in working-class-to-poverty culture. You don't typically see wealthy white men coming in. I mean, I'm no expert (juggalologist), but it strikes this casual observer as odd.
So when I heard someone coming from that position wrote a political story that touched heavily on themes of modern wealth and class conflict. I was interested in seeing how he was going to portray that dynamic.
And here it is, I guess.

The context of this wrong remark is an online presentation wherein someone, without permission, reproduced a story I made called "Psycholonials" in its entirety, while their own "bonus commentary" was presented alongside my work, editorializing spitefully and inaccurately, as has been this individual's tendency for years. This was reproduced and posted for free while this was still a paid game. I didn't authorize this type of reproduction, but this is someone who has built much of their reputation on challenging the idea that this should matter, while spitting in the face of the creators they "borrow" from.

But where do people get ideas like this, and what compels them to state these falsehoods as facts so confidently? It doesn't seem like there's any basis for drawing these conclusions, except that at one point people saw some patents, assumed it must have meant they made lots of money, and then began writing fanfiction about me to suit certain narratives, usually about Hiveswap, or the "scam" it supposedly represented. In this case specifically, the motive seems pretty clear to me. Dehumanize and portray me as a Rich Man, doing Rich Man Things, writing stuff I know nothing about, to continue fostering hatred and distrust in the fandom toward me and those who work with me.

I don't want to get hung up on this one specific claim about my background, because it misses the point. Ultimately, the point of writing this was never about claims like this, or setting the record straight on the overwhelming body of misinformation about me. The history of my dad's flawed vision, the software I made, and its many ramifications which include creating Homestuck itself, seemed worth reporting on. Unfortunately, when mentioning anything about my history, bringing up the contradictions extending from "drama" of past discourse seems to be necessary. Since there has been so much misinformation about those topics, much of which has stuck, now by speaking the truth about these matters awkwardly comes across as a sort of correction to common misunderstandings which still persist.

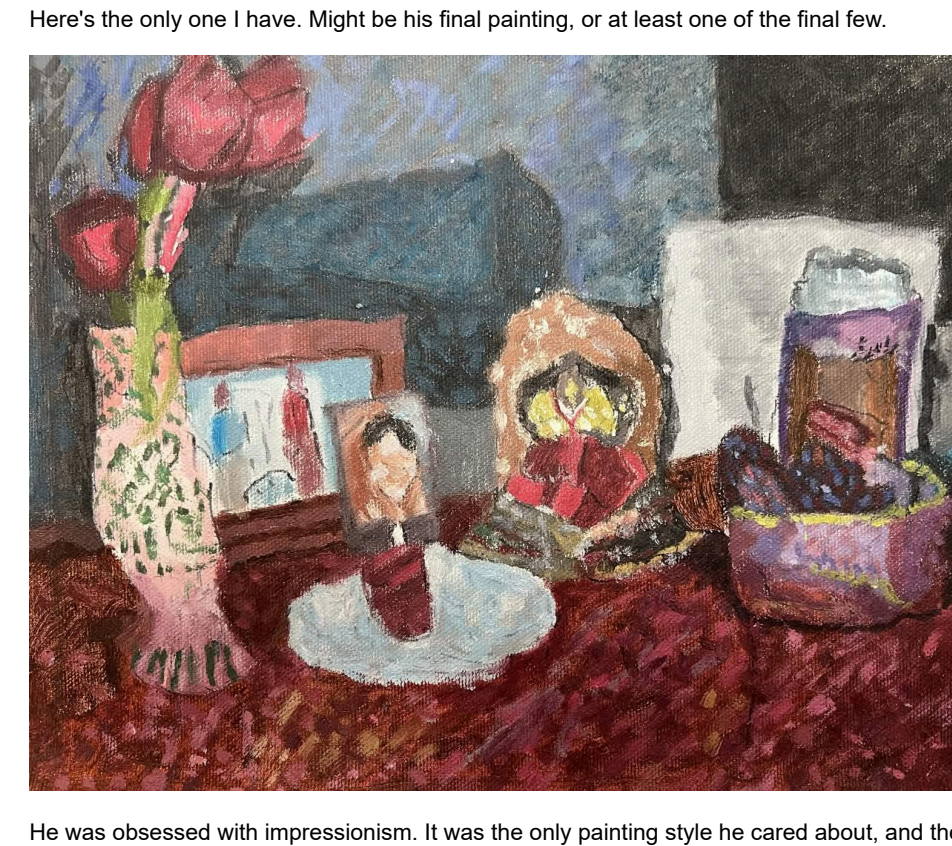
So on that note, I'm dropping that subject, and returning briefly to the topic I began with, a software application I programmed as a teenager. The HVC Color Composer, though in spirit was derivative of my father's murky, almost hallucinatory views on color, actually stood as a pretty novel and inventive work of ingenuity by a very young creator and programmer. This is how I see the work now, at this point in my life. It was original, it had a real vision behind it which then got mangled and corrupted by the shady business practices of my elders, and it had genuine utility which no one else had ever provided before.

As for the HVC Color Composer, despite the fact that I lost interest in this project a long time ago, after reviewing it again for the purposes of telling this story, I can still see some value it could have for artists. Maybe it does have some potential to awaken some great revolution in the way artists work with color, as my dad insisted? In a way, I almost wish I could say bringing attention to this old project serves as an homage to a cool vision he once had. But the point is, it was never really even his vision. The ideas just didn't make any sense before I turned them into this program. So it's actually my vision, which I abandoned long ago out of disaffection for an interesting idea ruined by crass business practices. I guess his only real vision was the hope that people would appreciate what I did with this thing, but he never lived to see that happen.

Unfortunately, this thing is now practically unusable to artists. The plug-in probably doesn't work well with modern versions of Photoshop, and it's only a limited demo anyway. If it's ever going to have life again, it would need to be rebuilt. But anyone with reasonable programming skills could probably look at everything I described here and reverse-engineer the concept to make something new. If the foretold revolution in color theory was meant to happen, it probably needs at least one person interested enough to take this on, not to mention a significant number of people being willing to put the methods into practice. If it's really the breakthrough my dad thought it was, we probably shouldn't have needed to beg people at trade shows to care about it.

That was basically the sort of thing I was telling him by the end of this. People need to actually understand and resonate with something you're pushing for it to take off. It doesn't really work to have a sort of quasi-religious vision that something is "supposed to be revolutionary," then get frustrated and crash out forever when nobody understands it. That's why I thought just giving this away for free, making some art, showing people by example how it worked, was the better approach than all this weird business shit. In the final couple years of his life he seemed to come around to that view, and used the program to make a few paintings.

Here's the only one I have. Might be his final painting, or at least one of the final few.



He was obsessed with impressionism. It was the only painting style he cared about, and the only painters he admired or talked about was a group of about four or five French impressionists. That's it. He actually had a pretty elitist attitude and spoke derisively, in a very humorous way, about most other artists and art genres. His whole act was pretty funny, he just never had much of an audience. All modern art was bad, and anything he felt contributed to bringing ugliness into the tradition of painting was to be shunned and ridiculed. He had a particular negative hyperfixation with Picasso. He thought all his paintings were trash, he was wildly overrated, and basically ruined art forever through his shitty influence.

I listened to these rants, thought the whole bit was pretty funny, the way he put it, but I never actually agreed with him. My stance would be, yeah I hear you, Picasso's paintings are comically chopped sometimes, he had kind of a crass attitude, but he was out there painting, wasn't he? He sold more than a few works of art in his day. Where are your paintings? What do you actually do? You didn't even make the software you evangelize about all day. Of course I didn't actually say these things, I just thought them.

This is something I observed in him which bugged me, that I also observed later in a lot of aspiring creators who talk a big game about making shit, but never actually do it. These extremely lofty standards, elitist attitudes about what makes good or bad art, seem most often to be a feature of people who never do anything, or are in some way incapable of pulling the trigger on all their big ambitions. This type of thinking always struck me as an expression of impotence. If you're always flexing your extremely high standards for art, it then serves as a convenient barrier to ever getting anything done. Nothing you make is ever going to meet your high standards, so you keep waiting until you're good enough, or everything in life is just right, or whatever other random obstacle has finally been cleared. And waiting, and waiting, and waiting. Then you die.

His unwarranted sense of elitism, and general sense of impotence when it came to making art, I think had the reverse effect on me as my work in comics evolved. I found it so frustrating that he would speak endlessly about the virtues of great art without ever making anything, that the opposite mindset started to take effect, and I just started favoring the idea of getting much more imperfect material out there quickly, embracing the flaws of a more practical process. Lean into the flaws, center them as a critical feature of whatever artistic statement is being made. Homestuck is full of such flaws. There's a lot of slop throughout the story, visually speaking, writing choices, experimentation with media… that was the point. It wasn't supposed to be perfect, it was just supposed to be trying things, as much as possible, and above all, it was supposed to EXIST. I never let perfectionism stand in the way of getting new pages out every day, and it ballooned into something huge in the process, something people resonated with.

This makes me wonder if, by abandoning work on the HVC Color Composer, and moving on to make Homestuck about 5 years later, whether I walked away from something that didn't have the positive effect on the world of art which was intended through its mission statement, and made something which did have a positive effect, in a way that was totally unintended. But the nature of the positive effect for both projects is very different. The color software was meant to be a tool that improves the skill of an artist, by helping them use color more effectively. Homestuck, for the most part, I don't feel improves anyone's skill as a creator, except maybe in some minor ways, if you want to take notes on its multi-media experimentation, unusual narrative choices, approach to characterization, things like that. I guess it can be instructive in that sense, just as any work can be.

But that's not the positive effect I've observed. It doesn't quite make people better creators, instead I've seen that it makes people BECOME creators. It has functioned as more of an inspirational force than a means to improvement. This is as I'd prefer it. The problem with the "suffering artists" of the world, as my dad described them, was not that they all weren't good enough to be successful. The much more common problem was the one he suffered from - a fundamental inability to execute on his creative vision. Lack of inspiration, or believing the bar of achievement was too high to even bother trying, or whatever other excuse is randomly put in the way of just getting down to business and making stuff. There are countless works of creativity I've observed that trace directly to Homestuck's influence, so its legacy feels not like something which makes artists better, but which unblocks artists - motivates them. I almost wonder if, given that my dad started painting again shortly after I began Homestuck, whether he became unblocked by it too. If only for a few more years.